DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 926 JC 840 519

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TITLE Value, Freedom and Transformation: Some Reflections on the Place of Value in the Teaching of Philosophy.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Eastern Division Conference of the Community College Humanities Association (Secaucus, NJ, November 1-2, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Course Content; *Course Objectives; *Philosophy; Program Descriptions; Two Year Colleges; *Values Clarification; *Values Education
IDENTIFIERS *City University of New York La Guardia Comm Coll; Self Awareness

ABSTRACT

Values and value awareness are central dimensions of the philosophy program at LaGuardia Community College. The broad and fundamental values of the program include the development of self-awareness, the recognition and overcoming of confusion and alienation, and the emergence of clarity and integration. Philosophy (seen as the process of critical reflection, capable of examining any aspect of experience while maintaining the integrity, rigor, and systematic nature of the enterprise) can help students explore life experience by means of "life concepts," such as freedom, morality, sociality, religiousness, and love. Analyzing these concepts forces students to become aware of the concepts' abstract and experiential dimensions and the affective and non-reflective nature of their own values. The centerpiece of philosophical analysis conceived as the exploration of life experience is the careful opening up of values, so that students come to acknowledge what their values are and begin to reflect upon and evaluate them. In opening up value analysis, it is most effective to raise particular problems and let students respond, revealing what values are held explicitly and implicitly. One of the most difficult aspects of employing this method is getting students to recognize it as a method--a slow, patient, systematic analysis of a dimension of experience. Therefore the introductory course in LaGuardia's philosophy program introduces students to the method, while advanced courses such as Ethics and Philosophy of Religion focus on particular aspects of life experience. (LAL)

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ED248926

Value, Freedom and Transformation: Some Reflections on the Place of Value in the Teaching of Philosophy

by

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Presented at the Eastern Division Conference of the Community College Humanities Association
Secaucus, New Jersey, November 1-2, 1984

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The conference focus on human values and their discovery--perhaps also their creation--is an appropriate one. For it is through personally held values--even if this is meant in the minimal sense of "preference"--that people act. However, the situation is not as straightforward as it might seem, since values are often held unconsciously or, more simply, implicitly. This is true not only of our deepest values, those which determine how we see and live our lives at the most basic levels, but also of those values which get us through our everyday routines. Beyond this is the disquieting thought that people typically do not think through their values in a critical fashion and so, in a significant sense, are not holding or acting on <u>their</u> values. Most often, one's values are simply the reflection of various external influences, passively and unthinkingly accepted. Further, when people finally do start to think about values, they often do so in a context of extremely superficial subjectivisms and relativisms which lead to claims such as "Whatever I feel is of value is" and "Whatever I or my group believes is of value is."

Thus, the importance and obscurity of these matters combine to create a situation of near paralyzing chaos. Unfortunately, however, the paralysis does not inhibit violent, irrational or destructive behavior, but only the behavior that would be careful and critical reflection upon, and choice of, value.

Somehow this situation must be turned around. But it is idle to think that this can be done by humanists and social scientists, teaching their courses properly and doing their research constructively. Without a general and profound social reorientation, our efforts are little more than a breeze in a hurricane. Yet this is no reason to despair or to cease our best efforts; it is only to face, in a realistic fashion, the depth and difficulty of the problem.

In this context, I would like to present the form and content of the philosophy program at F. H. LaGuardia Community College, where over the last eleven-plus years I have created and administered the program. Value and value awareness are central dimensions of the program. The broad and fundamental values expressed in the program include the development of self awareness (an aspect of freedom), the recognition of confusion and alienation and, to whatever degree possible, the overcoming of the latter and so the emergence of clarity and integration. The route to the achievement of these values involves the students becoming aware of their values: the ones they explicitly hold as well as those they implicitly hold and are logically committed to given what they say and do. As students become more aware of these elements, they simultaneously become more aware of how they see, experience and act in the world. This awareness provides a

focal point and so a lever for possible transformation; for now the the students can begin to evaluate the values which previously, often non consciously, were determining who they were and how they saw the world. In turn, this provides the possibility for the selection of values and, indeed, for the creation of value. To value is actively to place oneself in relationship to what is. When this is done "rationally," it creates meaning and connection; when done "irrationally," non-sense and disconnection.

Within this situation, philosophy is in a privileged position, for its analytic tools can be employed on any content at any level. One is not limited to teaching the philosophers of the past--or present--or to exploring some fixed set of problems. Rather, one can see philosophy as the activity or process of critical reflection, capable of examining any aspect of experience, while always maintaining the integrity, rigor and systematic nature of the enterprise. In conducting these explorations of experience, one will, of course, encounter philosophers of the past--and present--as well as certain recurring and crucial problems. But when this occurs these elements will be serving the particular explorations engaged in rather than controlling in a seemingly arbitrary fashion the activity itself.

Very generally, I see philosophy as the exploration of life experience by means of what I call "life concepts." These include:

"freedom;" "morality;" "sociality;" "being religious;" "love;" and many others. Such concepts have two dimensions: a more or less purely abstract, conceptual dimension; and a concrete, experiential dimension. The latter is revealed as the concept is applied to that aspect of experience picked out by the concept. Thus, analyzing the concepts literally forces one to analyze and so become aware of the experiential dimension of the concept. For it is this dimension of the analysis that provides the content of the concept. Given these claims, philosophical analysis must involve dealing not only with intellectual, but also with affective, elements. Feeling, emotion, imagination, fantasy--all of these are part of our "inner" life, and as we explore life experience, these elements must be looked at, grasped and perhaps modified or altered.

Here is where the "teaching" of values becomes prominent and exceedingly difficult. For while it is easy, and perhaps somewhat comforting, to think that the holding of values is a purely or essentially intellectual matter, this is far from the truth. As suggested, most often our values are held non-reflectively, simply taken over from external sources. Yet, typically, people hold on to their purported values with a tenacity that is quite remarkable. However, since these values have often not been critically chosen, the tenacity does not flow from intellectual

conviction, but rather from emotional need. And I say this not only with regard to those who have blindly and unthinkingly taken on values, but also, though perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree, with regard to those of us who have and continue to evaluate and re-evaluate our values.

Given this analysis, our values are the royal road into an understanding of ourselves and how we see the world. Finding out how we have come to hold these values and how we relate to them reveals much about the sort of person we are - and these realizations can produce various sorts of shocks. The careful opening up of values, so that students can come to acknowledge what these are and begin to reflect upon and evaluate them is perhaps the centerpiece of philosophical analysis conceived as the exploration of life experience. And so conceived, it involves the possibility of transformation.

I just mentioned that value analysis must be opened up carefully. What I have in mind is a somewhat indirect approach. Rather than call for a direct statement and evaluation of values, it is more effective to raise particular problems and see what the students say in response. What is said will reveal what values are held explicity and implicitly. If the student has not critically thought through his values, the explicit or stated values will be what he has taken over from others, what he thinks

he should value, or some variation or combination of these. The implicit values will be those the student is committed to given his explicit values. Now, if the student has difficulty with his implicit values, this may direct his attention back to the explicit values and reveal to him that they are not truly his. This may, in turn, set him on the path of choosing or creating both his explicit and implicit values, always within the "constraints" of logic and coherence. This procedure, when successful, helps to release the student's critical and creative energy.

These explorations into experience and value can focus on any aspect of lived experience: individual freedom; morality; collective life; religion; love; sexuality; and many more. But one of the most difficult aspects of employing this method is getting students to recognize it as a method, i.e., as a slow, patient, systematic analysis of a dimension of experience as opposed to an attempt to get the "right answer." Given this, I think students need an introductory course which carefully and purposefully exposes them to the method or process. With this background, they then can go on to more advanced courses which will be deeper probes into experience.

The Philosophy program at LaGuardia recognizes this need. The entry level course, Introduction to Philosophy: Freedom and

Human Action, seeks to involve students in the activity of philosophical analysis, to have them "do philosophy." The surface of concern is language, human nature and freedom. But of all the underlying concerns, one of the most important and immediate is that philosophical analysis and exploration cannot proceed if one is unwilling to explore one's beliefs and values. If either consciously or unconsciously one is clinging to unthought through beliefs and values, the explorations are cut off.

After pointing out the importance of language to the explorations of experience, we try to show how beliefs about human nature can rule out certain possibilities of action. Elements of this are spelled out more subtly in our treatment of freedom where it is suggested that engaging in the process of critical reflection is an aspect of freedom. That is, the ability to reflect upon and evaluate one's beliefs and values is seen as a significant dimension of freedom, while the inability to do so is seen as a lack of freedom. This emphasis obviously creates a situation of self confrontation for the student. He must become self aware enough to see what he is willing and unwilling to do here and why he has the attitude he does. He needs, that is, to focus on what is important to him and why it is so. Now this is clearly a value question - at this level only involving a description or statement of

what values one holds. But it is also a value question at a deeper level, for it is being suggested that it is indeed important, i.e., of value, to reflect upon and evaluate one's beliefs and values; and so the student needs to confront the more difficult normative question as well. Those students who affirm the value of the activity and choose to proceed with philosophic analysis have found one way to begin or, perhaps, accelerate the slow process of continuing growth or self transformation.

I think such an introductory experience is necessary as a first step into anything resembling meaningful analysis of life experience. The experience provides students not only with the rudiments of the skill of focused self awareness, but also with some of the conceptual skills which are needed as philosophical analysis proceeds and deepens. Given the general levels of propaganda, manipulation and intellectual and emotional dishonesty that pervade the culture, most students cannot gracefully ease into the sorts of analyses that occur in well-functioning philosophy classes.

The lessons of Introduction to Philosophy are extended and deepened in the program's advanced courses. Each of these focuses on a dimension of lived experience and attempts to open up for examination and evaluation the relevant beliefs, attitudes

and values held by the student. In Ethics, the attempt is to have the student explore systematically how he sees and treats others. The question, "why be moral?", is the topic of the course paper and treating this matter enables students to confront directly their relationship to the "moral institutions of life." Philosophy of Religion focuses on the distinction between "having a religion" and "being religious" and invites the student to reflect on the meaning and value of being religious. In Social and Political Philosophy, students are asked to explore their simultaneous existence as individual and collective beings, and to reflect on the value of collective or social life. Finally, in Philosophy of Love and Sexuality, students examine the concept/experience of love and the relationship of the latter to sexuality.

I hope these very brief remarks give a sense of how each course plunges the student into an aspect of experience at a reasonably profound level. The analyses enable student beliefs, attitudes and values to come to the surface so they may be evaluated. This procedure involves two explicit and distinct steps, steps which may be obscured if the ambiguity on "discovering" in "Discovering Human Values through Humanities and Social Sciences" is not made explicit. One sense of "discover" involves the finding of what is already there, what already

exists. In this sense, we talk about students discovering the values which they already hold, explicitly or implicitly. But there is another, and in this context perhaps more significant, sense of "discover." This involves, not finding what already exists, but rather creating something new. Here, by penetrating to the depths of human existence, the Humanities and Social Sciences enable the individual--student and teacher alike--to confront one's situation in both its unique and universal aspects and so fashion one's own unique response to it. But this of course, is no easy task, for in so fashioning one's response, one must become clear as to one's own creative energy as well as the clarity of one's perception of the world. The contemporary barriers to such an accomplishment are legion. Various forms of "irrationalism," "skepticism" and "relativism" combine to produce and express deepseated alienation. These phenomena must be confronted and their deeper challenges faced, understood and, where possible, transcended. That we are not clear on how to go on at this level is an indication of the depth of the problem.

Again, the focus on values is timely and appropriate.

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